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ABSTRACT

A teacher describes his unexpected success with a technique designed to help special needs ninth graders acquire writing and spelling skills. Assisted by his teaching aide, he used a dictation exercise coupled with immediate feedback and touch. He found that dictating sentences helped students make transitions betweens talking and writing. The approach expanded into grammar, punctuation, and capitalization. The grammar is used only as a way to solve usage problems. The paper concludes by noting possible problems in using the approach (chiefly, too many students and no aide). (CL)

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POUND THE STUDENT

A Great Leap Forward in Pedagogy

By Frank Zepezauer

That's exactly what I wanted to do: pound each student, hard, on the head. You know the feeling. And these were classic types, limited skills students from 1-1/2 to 3 years below their ninth-grade level in reading, antsy and noisy, frustrated by the mysteries of writing, packed in extra numbers because of budget cuts. I had just finished Period 3 where I did everything wrong. I yelled at them, threatened them, warned them of failure, yelled at them while I knew that yelling wouldn't change them and would only create resentment.

Now I faced Period 4, a bunch of hard educational nuts to crack, and the only thing I wanted to do was to pound their heads. Then, for some crazy reason I said to myself, "Why not pound them?" The inhibited muscular impulse had sparked an idea. I tossed out the shambles of a lesson plan that had brought me through Period 3, distributed scrap paper, and off the top of my head dictated sentences containing spelling or usage problems.

The first sentence I called out was, "I want to go too." I had yet to see a "Special Help Class" that could handle the to/too/two homophone. As I dictated, I walked up and down the rows watching the students write, and as

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soon as I spotted a mistake, I pounded the kid on the head, twice, very gently, and I said, "That's not the way you spell it there. Here's the way you spell it." I then wrote the correction over the error and told him to try again. Then I returned to my dictation, walking up and down, pounding a head gently every time I saw a mistake. My aide sat at her desk wondering what had come over me. But pretty soon she got up and did the same on the other side of the class. We went on this way for half an hour, checking mistakes and requesting corrections, and the kids kept working.

But we did something else. Every time we saw a kid write a sentence correctly, we stopped and praised him. My aide, a middle-aged, chubby lady who could pose for Mother's Day cards, paused at each desk and with each correct answer she hugged the kid and said, "That's wonderful!" or "Now you're getting it." I soon did the same, patting each kid on the back as soon as I saw something to praise.

What I noticed first was the feeling. Something always tells you inside whether you're connecting with the kids or not. And I had that feeling. I even noticed kids turning around with their papers saying, "You haven't looked at this one yet," or "How'd I do on this?" Some kids even walked across the room to get a response. So, something was working, and as I repeated the new technique over the next few weeks refining it as I went along, I asked why.

You've probably guessed already. I had happened upon nearly instant reinforcement, computer-like feedback with a human touch. Special Help students, most kids that age for that matter, don't want to wait a day or a week while you laboriously red-pencil their mistakes and praise their improvements. Even when you have them correct their mistakes or rewrite their

papers, you'll find that the delayed response diminishes your intended affect. But if you dictate a problem-filled sentence and admonish or praise immediately, you're getting to the kids when the most need it.

Other things are happening. Most kids with verbal difficulties are usually ear oriented. To them talking and writing take place in separate languages. By dictating sentences you help them make transitions. Consider as one simple and persistent example the problem of the to/too/two homophone. Say out loud, "I want to go too." You will notice that you don't say the "to" and the "too" the same way. The "to" in "to go" is a schwa that resembles "tih go;" The "too" at the end clearly rhymes with "blue." So these two words are not really homophones because in most cases they do not have the same sound, something you can immediately demonstrate with a voice drill. Thus during dictation you can correct their misspelling by leaning over and saying, "Listen to how I say it: "I want tih go tooo." The kid is now on his way. You won't turn him into an honor student - I'm talking here about a method that works, not a miracle - but he'll progress and feel good about it.

Sometimes you have to emphasize the sounds a little, ham it up. Black kids, for example, seldom enunciate the "d" ending in words like "prejudiced" and "supposed." So you have to say, "You're not supposedduh to be prejudicedduh," emphasizing the end sound loud enough to be heard next door. You can also deal with the always exasperating sentence run-on by emphasizing the voice changes that occur at the end of a sentence. Spoken declarative sentences normally end with a slight rise in pitch followed by a sharp drop and a pause, something our ears register automatically as the sign of a sentence

ending. If you clearly enunciate a sentence pair such as:

Carol walked slowly into the room. Then she saw the body.

most of your students will punctuate them properly. Those who don't need a loudly whispered repeat in their ear. By this method you can teach relatively sophisticated punctuation such as the comma following an introductory clause. In a sentence like:

Because he left the house, he didn't see Martha.

the students hear the comma, and they won't hear it in:

He didn't see Martha because he left the house.

In the process you can also demonstrate how it is possible to begin sentences with "because." The lesson thus leads naturally to a study of sentence fragments.

The quick feed-back procedure encourages such impromptu mini-lectures, the kind that work best with limited skills students. For example, I might dictate the sentence, "Their rhythm is too irregular," and then go to the board asking, "Why should that word 'rhythm' have that 'h' in there?" I answer with a brief talk on the Greek letter "rho" whose "h" is aspirated, and have the students pronounce it by breathing out as they say it. I can do the same with other words which have developed from formerly pronounced silent letters, as

for example, "knight" which once had been the German "knecht" where every letter was sounded. I also use the same five minute mini-lectures to discuss usage and grammar exploring some problem uncovered in the dictation.

I mentioned revising my techniques. I found that I couldn't do the same thing the same way every day. I therefore began to alternate oral with written drill. For example, on one day I will dictate sentences such as the following: (The problem part is underlined.)

I'm hoping to go hopping.

Dear Madam:

Have you seen the report yet?

We drove to the freeway. Then we saw a stalled truck.

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The following day I transfer these sentences to dittoed sheets, this time inserting the mistakes as they normally appear. I then distribute the error-filled sentences to the students instructing them to circle every error and to re-write the item correctly. The exercise now looks like this:

I'm hopping too go hoping.

Dear madam,

Have you seen the report yet.

We drove to the freeway, then we saw the stalled truck.

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I want too go to.

Notice how both kinds of exercise allow you to cover problems in spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and grammar. Then, after a few days of alternating oral and written drill, you can determine how much they´ve learned with a test.

Notice something else? There´s little grammar. I believe even limited skills students should master the fundamentals. But as my experience and that of a number of investigators has shown, grammar lessons are a roundabout way to solve usage problems. It´s better to get at it directly by telling the student, over and over, that this is the right way and that is the wrong way. You can still sneak in grammar by using technical terms: "Be sure to put a past tense "ed" after that verb, Martha," "Does the ´z´ sound in this noun show more than one or does it show belonging, Tom?" Nothing new about this: it´s called the inductive method.

In the same way I can move from word forms to paragraph forms and teach composition. For example, I can drill students on transitional terms such as those needed to move from comment to example. I might dictate:

We´ve had some very good professional teams in the Bay Area.

For example,

and then ask students to finish the sequence with three examples. Or on the

written exercise I might put in the frequently appearing:

We've had some good teams this year. Like the basketball team.

and ask them to correct it. At times, usually at the end of the drill, I dictate a topic sentence and ask them to complete the paragraph with relevant support. I can also extract lessons out of a set of corrected compositions by listing the most frequently occurring errors and inserting them in the next oral drills.

Besides varying the class hour, this quick feedback system has other advantages. As you move constantly among the students, you can head off disciplinary problems before they create trouble. You can also manage quick little visits where a, "I like your new hair-do, Karen," or a "Good going at the wrestling match, Deidrick," can be intertwined with the language lessons. The frequent desk stops keep students on the alert. The laggard who likes to drift off unnoticed into his private world knows that this time a teacher or aide will be at his desk every few minutes. The pace is therefore brisk and business like, full of activity. The hour passes by faster for student and teacher

What about the touching and hugging? We happened on to that way of doing things by accident and now treat it as a game. On that first day I said, "Let's play pound the student," and then went about tapping heads gently. (Notice how I repeat the word "gently?") So did my aide. But we soon found that the pats on the back and the hugging worked better. As you know, touching students requires common sense. You may have students for whom it won't work. Play

it by ear. If it comes naturally, few forms of feedback work better than a warm, encouraging hug.

Any problems? Of course. The procedure works best with 25 students or less and with the help of an aide. If you are alone, thirty plus students will send you racing back and forth trying to make all your one-on-one contacts. But with help - and I can't think of a better way to use para-professionals - you can move at a good pace and reach each student. In addition, it doesn't work well if you over-use it. I turn to the quick feed-back drills two or three times a week, using the rest of the time for grammar, composition, and literature.

The fast feedback system lends itself to a variety of composition lessons, reading lessons, too, if you consider how often you ask students to connect the spoken to the written word. I recommend it because so far it has worked well for me, and, altered by your own teaching style, it may work well for you, too. When you consider the hassles of teaching usage to limited skills students, it's worth trying. Do you want to go, too?

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